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ABSTRACT

This paper presents and discusses the responses of a class of first-grade students and a class of fourth-grade students to the elements of psychological maltreatment in the fairy tales "Cinderella" and "The Twelve Months." Responses of the first-grade students indicate that both boys and girls felt that the fairy tale heroine let herself be treated badly because she was nice. When asked what they would have done if they were treated like that, the responses of the female students indicated that they believed that being nice would set things right in the end. However, the boys indicated that their reactions to mistreatment would be to strive to defend themselves rather than to passively accept their circumstances. Responses of the fourth-grade students indicated that they felt that the fairy tale heroine let herself be treated badly because she was not only nice but she was also powerless. When asked what they would have done if they were treated like that, both boys and girls thought that they would strive to defend themselves or would actively seek to change their circumstances. The study has practical applications in that it appears that fairy tales can be used as a resource for raising children's awareness of the elements of psychological maltreatment. The paper also includes a discussion of the theoretical frameworks thought to be important in explaining the importance and impact of fairy tales, including psychoanalytic, social-learning, behavioral, and feminist viewpoints. (Contains 26 references.) (GCP)

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CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT IN FAIRY TALES

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ABSTRACT

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The responses of a class of first-grade students and of a class of fourth-grade students to the elements of psychological maltreatment in the fairy tales "Cinderella" and "The Twelve Months" are discussed. Responses of the first-grade students indicated that both boys and girls felt that the fairy tale heroine let herself be treated badly because she was nice. When asked what they would have done if they were treated like that, the responses of the female students indicated that they believed that being nice would be the response that would set things right in the end. However, the boys indicated that their responses to mistreatment would be to strive to defend themselves rather than to passively accept their circumstances. Responses of the fourth-grade students indicated that they felt that the fairy tale heroine let herself be treated badly because she was not only nice but she was also powerless. When asked what they would have done if they were treated like that, both boys and girls thought that they would strive to defend themselves or would actively seek to change their circumstances. This study has practical applications in that it appears that fairy tales can be used as a resource for raising children's awareness of the elements of psychological maltreatment. This is a fruitful area for research that lends itself particularly well to qualitative methodologies.

Children's Responses to Psychological Maltreatment in Fairy Tales

Introduction

Can the presentation of fairy tales be used to seek out children's feelings about abuse? Further, is there a difference between what the children think the abused one in a story could have done to escape the abuse and what they think they themselves would do if they were abused? Abuse is a topic that is not pleasant to think about. Fairy tales can provide a non-threatening vehicle for investigating children's responses about abuse because, according to Arbuthnot and Sutherland (1972), the shocking elements in fairy tales seem less horrible because they are seldom attended by realistic details. A satisfying conclusion suitably disposes of all problems, conflicts, and villains. Theoretical frameworks thought to be important in explaining the importance and impact of fairy tales have included psychoanalytic, social-learning, behavioral, and feminist viewpoints.

Psychoanalytic framework

The world of the fairy tale is typically set long ago and far away, and thus from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, thought to be sufficiently removed from the child's world to allow the child to project unacceptable or ambivalent feelings into that fairy world. The value of the fairy tale is clearly articulated by Bettelheim (1976). He believes that the fairy tale is therapeutic because children can find their own solutions through contemplating what the story seems to imply about them and their inner conflicts at that moment in their lives. The struggle depicted in the fairy tale is clearly drawn. The characters are unidimensional in the sense of being, for instance, all good or all bad. Thus, children are able to identify the characters in the story and to identify with the characters that meet their needs.

Bettelheim (1976) noted that the needs of a particular child are directly related to the developmental stage the child is in, as different tasks confront the child at each age level. He warns

against an attempt to determine which fairy tales will be most important to the child, stating that "This only the child can determine and reveal by the strength of feeling with which he reacts to what a tale evokes in his conscious and unconscious mind" (p. 17). Bettelheim further states that "the fairy tale does not hit the child over the head with an explicit solution to his developmental crisis but rather permits him to arrive at his own solution, at his own pace, by contemplating elements of the story which are relevant to his particular stage of development" (p. 25). Bettelheim has also suggested that the fairy tale helps the child through periods of developmental transition by conveying comfort in the sense that others have experienced traumatic happenings in their lives and by conveying hope in the sense that the characters managed to overcome these difficulties.

Fairy tales usually end with "and they lived happily ever after." The happy ending implies that the hero or heroine of the story has resolved the inner conflict that accompanied the struggle, has received what is needed from the magical sources, and can go forward to do well. As the conflict is thought to take place at least partially on an unconscious level, so too the fairy tale is thought to speak to the child, in part, on that same level (Bettelheim, 1976).

Like Bettelheim, Von Franz (1975) stresses the importance of the unconscious, specifically the collective unconscious. She states, "Fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes...They represent the archetypes in their simplest, barest, and most concise form" (p. 1). Late in his life, Jung (1964) took care to point out that archetypes were often misunderstood to be definite mythological images or motifs. What they really are, stated Jung, is "a tendency to form representations of a motif – representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern" (p. 67). Thus, fairy tales are important, from a Jungian framework, in that they stimulate the reader to recreate primordial images or motifs.

Social-learning framework

The importance of fairy tales can also be considered from a social-learning viewpoint. A social-learning approach emphasizes that learning can take place without any direct reinforcement (Rotter, 1954; Bandura & Walters, 1963). Rotter stresses an individual's expectations about future outcomes and the subjective value of reinforcement in determining what an individual does. Thus, a child listening to a fairy tale and selectively attending to certain elements could influence how the child approaches future situations and the child's expectations of achieving success in those situations. For example, a child who hears or reads that Cinderella was rewarded after bearing her lot patiently might have similar expectations regarding the outcome of personal situations that are construed as somehow similar to those of the character in the story.

Thus, from a social-learning framework, fairy tales make it manifest to the child that people who do good things in this life are apt to be rewarded and people who do bad things in this life are apt to receive punishment. The social-learning approach emphasizes the importance of awareness in learning. Thus, a child's reaction to, and subsequent adoption of ideas or behaviors from a fairy tale would be explained more in terms of awareness of those ideas and behaviors, rather than in terms of unconscious influence. Bandura (1969, 1971) has discussed both the importance of observation in learning and the impact a model has on a child's behavior.

Behavioral framework

Another theoretical framework which has historically been used to explain the importance or impact of a fairy tale is behaviorism, with its emphasis on reinforcement (Thorndike, 1911; Skinner, 1938). Thorndike (1911) stated that behaviors which result in pleasurable outcomes will tend to be repeated while those resulting in non-pleasurable outcomes will tend to not be repeated. Dollard and Miller (1950) provide a bridge between behavioral and psychoanalytic concepts. Like Freud, Dollard and Miller believe that conflict and anxiety are common human experiences; however, they believe

that conflict and anxiety are learned drives. Through principles of conditioning (Watson & Raynor, 1920), the child comes to associate anxiety with certain environmental situations. The anxiety thus acts as a drive, a motivator for the child. When the child encounters a stimulus such as a fairy tale to which the child makes a response (listening, looking, thinking about, vocalizing, identifying, projecting), these activities of the child can be thought to reduce the anxiety of the child and are consequently reinforcing.

The behaviorist explanation for why children are captivated by fairy tales is simply that the fairy tales are somehow reinforcing to them. A behavioral criterion for determining whether a fairy tale is reinforcing might be the child's attention paid to a particular tale and the child's asking to have it told a number of times.

The feminist viewpoint

The feminist discussion about the social and cultural effects of fairy tales began in the early 1970's. Lieberman (1972) did a textual study of certain tales in Andrew Lang's nineteenth-century collections and found that they were very much sexist. She pointed out that an examination of the best-known tales shows that active, resourceful girls are rare; most of the heroines are passive, submissive, and helpless. She feels that we need to examine the role of fairy tales as a source of acculturation for the idea that passivity, submissiveness, and helplessness will be rewarded. Because victimized girls are invariably rescued and rewarded, children may absorb the message that victims need not strive to defend themselves or actively seek to change their circumstances, for someone will turn up to set things right so they can live happily ever after. Lieberman (1972) also says that we must consider the possibility that the classical attributes of femininity found in these stories are in fact imprinted on children and reinforced by the stories themselves.

Bottigheimer (1986) and Yolen (1982) have also pointed out that the heroines in these tales tend to be passive and helpless. Tatar (1987) stated that the vast majority of the stepmothers in fairy tales

actively persecute not their stepsons, but their stepdaughters, who consequently take on the role of innocent martyrs and patient sufferers.

According to Zipes (1987), the movement toward women governing their own destiny and writing their own history has been a dominant tendency in feminist literary criticism. He stated that it was this criticism that provided the basis for the first complete study of fairy tales, which was conducted by Kolbenschlag (1979). Kolbenschlag was interested in the habitual manner in which women were forced and influenced to adopt particular roles and identities. She indicated that it was not the fairy tales themselves which were responsible for the creation of these roles, but rather that they were symbolic forms which reinforced self-destructive social and psychological patterns of behavior. Dowling (1981) also said that it was not the fairy tale that was responsible for the dependency of women. The fairy tale was only important in so far as it reflected how women were oppressed and how they allowed themselves to be oppressed.

Psychological maltreatment

Psychological maltreatment has come to be the preferred term to describe maltreating behaviors given various labels (e.g., emotional maltreatment, mental cruelty, mental injury, emotional abuse and neglect). This term is preferred because of its ability to subsume all affective and cognitive aspects of child maltreatment (Hart & Brassard, 1987).

Psychological maltreatment is receiving increasing attention as a prevalent and destructive form of abuse and neglect that constitutes a serious mental health problem. Removing oneself from an abusive situation is not as easy as it might seem, primarily because of psychological factors. It is the attack on the fulfillment of basic psychological needs that gives psychological maltreatment its destructive power (Gil, 1987). According to Pillari (1991), passivity is the typical response mode of persons who are abused and exploited. Instead of openly rebelling against such abuse and

exploitation, they are likely to turn into obedient victims. She further noted that victims often take care of their exploiters, defend and protect them, and try to absolve them of guilt.

Brassard and Gelardo (1987) have operationally defined psychological maltreatment by dividing the definition into seven acts, which include: rejecting, degrading, terrorizing, isolating, corrupting, exploiting, and denying emotional responsiveness.

Current study

Subjects: A class of 13 first-grade students and a class of 25 fourth-grade students participated in this study. The first-grade class was composed of 7 boys and 6 girls; the fourth-grade class was composed of 6 boys and 19 girls. I chose a first-grade class and a fourth-grade class in order to investigate whether there would be any differences between what the younger children and the older children thought that the abused one in a fairy tale could have done to escape the abuse and what they thought they would do if they themselves were abused.

Materials: For the study of the first-grade students' responses to psychological maltreatment in fairy tales, I chose Cinderella as retold by Paul Galdone (1978). First-grade students have had limited experience in responding to stories in written form. Therefore, I chose Cinderella because the students were familiar with the story and therefore less likely to be struggling with comprehension issues.

In this version of the story, Cinderella is forced to do all the household tasks and to wait on her stepmother and two stepsisters. When the stepsisters are invited to the king's ball, Cinderella helps them prepare for it. When Cinderella is left alone while her stepsisters are at the ball, she begins to weep. Her fairy godmother appears and prepares Cinderella for the ball, with instructions that she must leave by midnight. When Cinderella arrives at the ball, all are astonished by her beauty. Her stepsisters do not recognize her. She again attends the ball held the next night, but she does not leave in time and in her panic leaves her glass slipper behind. The message goes forth that the king's son

will marry the one whose foot fits the slipper. Cinderella becomes the bride. She forgives her stepsisters for treating her so badly. She finds husbands for them and brings them to the palace to live.

Cinderella (1978) contains six of the seven acts of Brassard and Gelardo's (1987) operational definition of psychological maltreatment:

1) rejecting – Cinderella is made to do all the hard work, while her stepsisters are pampered.

2) degrading – Cinderella is called by such names as cindermaid and dirty cinder-grub.

3) terrorizing – Cinderella is threatened and commanded to work from early morning to night.

4) isolating – Cinderella is made to sleep up in the attic, and is not allowed to go to the ball.

5) exploiting – Cinderella is kept at home in the role of a servant.

6) denying emotional responsiveness – Although Cinderella does personal favors for her stepsisters, they continue to spurn her affection and her attempts to interact with them.

For the study of the fourth-grade students' responses to psychological maltreatment in fairy tales, I chose "The Twelve Months" retold by Virginia Haviland in Favorite Fairy Tales Told in Czechoslovakia (1966). These students were familiar with the story of Cinderella, but none of them had heard the story "The Twelve Months," which is somewhat similar to that of Cinderella.

"The Twelve Months" tells of a widow who lives in a cottage with her daughter Holena and her stepdaughter Marushka. Holena is treated nicely, but Marushka is made to do all the work. Marushka is sweetly compliant. In order to get rid of Marushka, so that Holena will have no competition for suitors, Marushka is given three impossible tasks to perform, each of which is performed successfully with the aid of the Twelve Months. Through their magical aid, she is able to gather violets, strawberries, and apples in the middle of winter. When Holena decides to go fetch more apples herself, she is swallowed up in a snowstorm created by the Twelve Months. When

Holena's mother goes to search for her, she is also swallowed up in a snowstorm. Marushka marries a farmer and lives happily ever after.

"The Twelve Months" also contains six of the seven acts of Brassard and Gelardo's (1987) operational definition of psychological maltreatment:

1) rejecting – Marushka is made to do all the hard work, while her stepsister is pampered.

2) degrading – Marushka is called by such names as wretched creature, wicked girl, and good-for-nothing wretch.

3) terrorizing – Marushka is seized roughly and threatened. She tells the Twelve Months that her stepmother and stepsister will kill her if she is not successful in fulfilling their demands.

4) isolating – Marushka is pushed out into the snow and the door is bolted behind her. She gets lost in the woods.

5) exploiting – Marushka is kept in the role of a servant.

6) denying emotional responsiveness – Marushka returns joyfully after the completion of each of the three tasks, but her stepmother and stepsister continue to ignore her attempts to interact with them.

Cinderella and "The Twelve Months" are both suitable for investigating students' responses to questions regarding family abuse because both tales contain the elements of the abusive stepmother and stepsister(s) and the heroine who is the totally passive and submissive victim. Also, both tales contain six of the seven operational definitions of psychological maltreatment.

Procedure: The stories were read to the students without stopping and no conversation about the stories was initiated in order not to influence the children's responses to the questions. No illustrations were shown so that there would be no visual associations to interfere with personal meaning. As Bettelheim (1976) noted:

> Illustrations...do not serve the child's best needs...because the illustrations direct the child's imagination away from how he, on his own, would experience the story. The illustrated story is robbed of much content of personal meaning which it could bring to the child who applied only his own visual associations to the story, instead of those of the illustrator (pp. 59-60).

After each story presentation, students wrote in response to open-ended questions. It was explained to the students that there were no right or wrong answers, and that the purpose was to find out what they thought.

The first-grade students responded to the questions:

1) Why did Cinderella let them treat her badly?

2) What would you have done if you were treated like that?

The fourth-grade students responded to the questions:

1) Why did Marushka let them treat her badly?

2) What would you have done if you were treated like that?

Responses of the first-grade students

The names used are pseudonyms in order to provide anonymity. In response to the question, "Why did Cinderella let them treat her badly?", nearly every first-grade student indicated that Cinderella let her stepmother and stepsisters treat her badly because Cinderella was nice. Some examples of these written responses are:

Because she was nice. (Stevie)

Because she wos nise girl. (Logan)

Because she wus nice. (Jana)

Because she was just nice. And she dind't walt to be mean! (Christina)

Because she is nice. (Eddie)

Be kus she did not wut to hrt ther feligs. (Ashlie)

They are mean she is not. (Dustin)

Two students said it was because Cinderella was afraid:

Because she alfalde. (Shauna)

Bekoz she was afade. (Nikita)

Steven noted that it was "becoz she cunt do nothen abot it."

In response to the question, "What would you have done if you were treated like that?", several of the students responded that they would be nice:

If I was Cinderella I woude just be nice to my stepsisters and Cinderella's stepmother. (Christina)

I wud be nise to my sister because thea wus nise to me at the end of story thea wus nise to me. (Shauna)

I wude live in a palace becase I wos nise. (Nikita)

I wod be nice lik Cinderella. (Ashlie)

I woud do the same nise thing that Cinderlla dus everyone. (Matt)

However, Jana indicated some action:

I would say qut making fun of me.

Several of the boys were action oriented:

I wud run away. (Steven)

Run away. (Stevie)

I pek on them. I het them. I hert them. I be mean (Dustin)

Ed responded: I wouldn't have done nuthin they said." Bryan observed: If she was mean, they wuldn't pick on her so much. Bryan and Logan thought changing into an animal would be helpful:

I wood be a dog I wood bite them. (Bryan)

I would bee a dinosaur thrtsus rex because they wuld not mas with me. (Logan)

Responses of the fourth-grade students

In response to the question, "Why did Marushka let them treat her badly?", the most common response of the fourth-grade students was that Marushka let her stepmother and stepsister treat her badly because she thought she would be killed if she didn't:

Because she had no chose but to let them treat her badly. If she stood up to them they would try to kill her. (Quinton)

Because they would kill her if she didn't do what she was tould. (Tony)

They said they was going to kill her so she had to do everything they said because if she did not they were going to kill her. (Tracye)

Because if she didn't let them treat her bad then they would kill her. (Sonia)

Because they didn't like her and would kill her if they didn't get what they wanted. (Ashley)

Because they will kill her if she don't respect them. (Terrance)

Because they would kill her if she did not obay. (Jesse)

Because she knew if she didn't do what they told her to, she could get killed. (Jennifer)

She did not want to be killed. (Melvin)

It was also noted that Marushka had nowhere else to go:

Because they would put her out and she would have nowere to go. (Tonya)

If she did not she would have been trown out the cottage in the cold, deep snow. (Yolanda)

that she was afraid:

Because she was afriad of them. (Tracye)

Because she was sceer they were going to kill her and there were 3 of them. (Elouise)

that her father was dead:

She do not have no plaece to go and her perant was died. (Crystal)

and that she had no way to stop it:

she did not have no way to stop it. (Lakesha)

Five of the students responded that Marushka accepted mistreatment because she was kind or loving:

Because she was a kind person and not so evil as her stepmom and sister. (Melissa)

Because she loved them, she carred about them. (Ashley)

Because she didn't want to hurt there feelings. (Ursula)

Because she was a sweet little girl. (Sonia)

She loved them. (Kacie)

and one student commented that Marushka knew everything would turn out all right:

Because she know that something was going to happen to them. (Dennis)

In response to the question, "What would you have done if you were treated like that?", 17 of the 25 fourth-grade students said that they would run away, move out, or do their best to leave. Some examples of these responses are:

Run away. (Ashley)

I would run away. (April)

I would run away and never com back. (Tonya)

I would try to get away when they made me go get apple. (Jessey)

Run away from them. (Greg)

I would have moved out. (Raven)

I would try to leave do anything insep fight. (Ericka)

I would have ran away and ask the months were I should go to be safe. (Jennifer)

I would have been ran away because they didn't have no right to do me that because I pretteir than they. (Quinton)

Examples of other options, listed in order of frequency, included fighting or killing:

I would get my shot gun and threatened them. (Terrance)

I would kill my stepmother and her daughter to because know one deserves to be treated like that. (Crystal)

I would have killed them and then whent and stayed with the months. (Tony)

Punched them in there face. (Ashley)

If they did not let me go I would fight for my right to be just like them. (Quinton)

calling the police:

I would have gottin the pocile on them. (Felicia)

I would call the police and tell them that these people are treating me bad. (Kacie)

treating them the same way:

If I had been treated like Marushka, I would do the same. (Yolanda)

I was going to treat them like of they treated me because I wouldn't sit down there and let them walk over me I will do something about it I sould would. Ha! (Ursula)

and calling on divine protection:

I would call on the name of Jesus or run away. I would probbaly fuss and not get killed because there would be an angel over me. (Sonia)

Several of the students mentioned a series of possible courses of action:

Punched them in there face, moved out the house, treted them that way, make them see how it feel to be tretted that way, make them do all the dirty work while I sit and rest. (Ashley)

I will run away and tell the policanman and push her in the face. (Lakesha)

I would have not listen to them or I would run away or kill myself. (Melissa)

Tracye felt she would do just about anything to change her circumstances:

I would have kill them or they would just have to kill me or I would have to call the cops or I will fight for my rights or run away. I would have don anything to get away.

Alicia summed up the situation with her response:

I would stand up to them and tell them that I am to be treated with respet.

Discussion

It appears that fairy tales are well suited for the investigation of psychological maltreatment because the abusive elements are set forth as having happened in a time long ago and far away. Since the problems, conflicts, and villains are suitably disposed of, children feel the security of knowing that, in the end, the danger is resolved for good (Trousdale, 1989).

The analysis of the responses in this study revealed that nearly every response of the first-grade students to the question, "Why did Cinderella let them treat her badly?", indicated that they felt that Cinderella let herself be treated badly because she was so nice. Only two of these students indicated that Cinderella was afraid and one felt that Cinderella could do nothing about her situation.

An analysis of the fourth-grade students' responses to the question, "Why did Marushka let them treat her badly?", revealed that one-fifth of the students felt that Marushka let herself be treated badly because she was kind or loving. The rest of the students felt that Marushka accepted mistreatment because she was powerless. The reasons given included: Marushka could be killed if she did not obey, she had nowhere else to go, she was afraid, her father was dead, and she had no way to stop it. It appeared that the first-grade students had enculturated the idea, at least within the context of a fairy tale, that nice people allow themselves to be psychologically maltreated. The fourth-grade students indicated that nice people not only allow themselves to be mistreated but they are powerless to do anything about it.

An analysis of the first-grade students' responses to the question, "What would you have done if you were treated like that?", revealed that most of the female students felt that it was goodness rather than action that would set things right. All but one of the female students indicated that they would be nice if they were treated like Cinderella. The boys were action-oriented, indicating that they would run away, fight, refuse to obey, or change into an animal.

An analysis of the fourth-grade students' responses to the question, "What would you have done if you were treated like that?", revealed that all of the students thought that they would strive to defend themselves or would actively seek to change their circumstances. They would run away, move out, do their best to leave, fight or kill, call the police, treat their abusers the same way, or invoke divine protection. Several of the students mentioned a series of possible courses of action. Unlike the first-grade students, there was no difference between boys' and girls' responses.

An analysis of responses indicated that there was a difference between what the children thought that the abused one in the fairy tale could have done to escape the abuse and what they thought they themselves would do if they were abused. Within the context of the story, the students thought that Cinderella and Marushka accepted mistreatment because they were nice, kind, or loving, or because they had no options. However, when the students responded to the question of what they themselves would do if they were mistreated, most of them thought choices were possible.

A comparison of the first- and fourth-grade students' responses indicated that the first-graders felt more forgiving toward Cinderella's step relatives than the fourth-graders felt toward Marushka's. Perhaps the first-grade students were more forgiving toward Cinderella's stepsisters and were able to accept the lack of punishment because they could justify it by explaining that although Cinderella's stepsisters were very mean, they became nice at the end. Perhaps the children felt that if Cinderella could forgive them and continue to love them, they also could forgive them.

A limitation of this study is that I did not have follow-up interviews with these students. Therefore, their responses were not probed for further information. However, this study does indicate that children do respond to abuse issues in fairy tales. It appears that this is a fruitful area for research that lends itself particularly well to qualitative methodologies.

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